

I first met Evariste Misigaro two years ago. Though he told me that he was from Burundi, I immediately noticed how he was fluent in Swahili, a language not spoken widely in Burundi. So I asked him where he learned Swahili. And boom! Everything came out: a painful story of a life of which more than half has been spent on the move.



Evariste was forced into refuge in 1972 following a major ethnic cleansing in Burundi (in this particular ethnic crisis, it is believed that more than 100,000 Hutus were massacred by Tutsis, the two major tribes in Burundi). Being a Hutu, he fled to eastern Zaire (the current Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the Uvira area of South Kivu. Having witnessed the horrors of the massacres, Evariste has never dreamed of going back home. In fact, Zaire had become his new home where he enjoyed a relative stability and acceptance. There he met his wife, Valeria Hobga (also of Burundi origin) and together they have had 8 children, the children of the Diaspora.

But the relative peace on the other side of the border came into jeopardy in 1996 when war broke in that particular area of Uvira, a war that would eventually engulf the whole country and lead to what has come to be known as the first African World War. So the Misigaros had to flee

once more not to Burundi, their country of origin, but to Tanzania where thousands of Burundians have lived in refugee camps since 1972. In the last 5 years or so, the Tanzanian Government together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has worked very hard to close some of the refugee camps by either bestowing on some refugees Tanzanian citizenship, by relocating them to other countries, or again by repatriating them to their countries of origin. In fact, early this year, Tanzania granted citizenship to over 162, 000 Burundian refugees. The Misigaros were lucky (it remains to be seen) to be relocated to the US, indeed here in Worcester, MA. The whole family was kept together, except the elder (adult) son who failed the interview, a pre-requisite to any relocation.



It is hard to believe that Evariste has spent 38 years as a refugee, a period time almost as long as the Israelites' stay in the desert on their way to their Promised Land. Is America Evariste's Promised Land? Let's hope so! At least, he is no longer in a refugee camp, and together with his family he can enjoy peace and hopefully start pursuing the American Dream. His children have never set foot in the land of their ancestors. "That's a painful experience", Evariste said. Unfortunately, his case is not unique. In fact 16 Burundian families have been relocated here in Worcester, MA and more or less the same number in Springfield. But there are not only Burundians; there are other refugees from other Central African countries that have been plagued by conflict and war for the last decade or so. For instance, on November 7, when I went to say a mass in Swahili in Springfield, I met a Congolese family that had just been relocated there from Goma, in the eastern Congo via Zambia and South Africa. So many disrupted lives and families!

But unlike the Israelites in flight, these people who have come to Massachusetts, and to the United States, do have a place for worship and pastoral care. Unfortunately, so far, most of them are still struggling to learn English. For this reason, I have been solicited to help in many ways to minister to them. Just listening to them during this traumatic period of transition is one

of things they need most. Hearing confessions and saying mass in Swahili are part of this ministry. Fr. Mulumba Kambale, a newly arrived Assumptionist studying at Assumption College, has already been involved. Thanks be to God! More importantly, for those in Worcester, there is already an organized African Catholic Ministry at St Peters Parish on Main Street south. Led by the Kenyan community under the care of St Peter's pastoral team, this Catholic Community has opened the doors to the Burundians and, indeed, to every African Catholic living in Worcester who is willing to join. The support is real and the integration is palpable.



However, because of language and other problems, many are having a hard time finding work. And that is very hard. For example, Evariste has found nothing at this point. "I volunteer a few days per week at the Lutheran Center", he said, "just to get involved and to stay out of trouble". "I was moved, touched by this life experience, which he told with such humor", said Fr Mulumba after his first encounter with Evariste. And indeed, despite the pain in their eyes, these people are cheerful and friendly.· What's more, although many speak Swahili, there are some among them who do not know any language other than their native Kirundi. And that is our pastoral challenge!

By Fr. Salvator Musande, AA

(Editor's note: Fr. Salvator is a Congolese Assumptionist who is currently completely an MBA degree at Assumption. Both the dioceses of Worcester and Springfield have approached him to lend a hand with the newly arrived Burundian refugees.)